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Off The Road: Imperialism And Exploration in the American Road Movie

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"Road movies are too cool to address serious socio-political issues. Instead, they express the fury and suffering at the extremities of a civilized life, and give their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere."
–*Michael Atkinson, quoted in "The Road Movie Book" (1).*

"'Imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory"
–*Edward Said,* Culture and Imperialism (9)

"I am still a little bit scared of flying, but I am definitely far more scared of all the disgusting trash in between places"
-*Cy Amundson,* This Is Not Happening

"This is gonna be exactly like *Eurotrip*, except it's not gonna suck"
-*Kumar Patel*, Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay

Off The Road

Abstract: This essay explores the imperialist nature of the American road movie as it is defined by the film's era of release, specifically through the lens of how road movies abuse the lands that are travelled through. To accomplish this, my essay analyzes a classic road movie, *Easy Rider*, a more contemporary parody, *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, and the futuristic film, *The Martian*. All of these films treat everything that which is not the metropolitan traveller in a distinctly oppressive sense, and each time a new generation of filmmakers makes a road movie, it becomes entrenched in this hegemony in a unique and different way. Surely, this must mean that the structure of the road movie itself is inherently imperial, and I can no longer let that go unrecognized.

Key Words: *Road Movie, Frontierism, Gaze of the Other, Postcolonialism, Imperialism, Easy Rider, Harold and Kumar, The Martian*

What is an American road movie? No one can seem to agree on an exact definition, but there are a few similarities that seem to appear in every film that critics, academics, and the American public have interred in the canon. First, the film must follow roughly two to four Americans travelling either through America or abroad with the intent of reaching a destination, usually within a certain timeframe; for instance, New Orleans by Mardi Gras in *Easy Rider* (1969) directed by Dennis Hopper. Second, the movie must be more about the journey than the destinations on either end. Third, our travellers must be simultaneously alienated from and fanatically despised by the dominant culture as a whole and perform popular countercultural practices. These elements are often bent and rarely broken when it comes to the road movie, but there is one phenomenon left unaccounted for.

In almost every single road movie, our travellers must also encounter and interact with the strange lands they travel through and the people who live there.

While this interaction can be as simple as "hello" or as violent as a shotgun blast, they are more importantly characterized by their locations off the road in what I will call the "Landscapes of Brutality". The first section of this essay constitutes an investigation into these particular interactions, as well as the world of Othering that occurs inherently in the nature of the road movie.

Boiled down to my simplest message, I aim to prove that the road movie is an imperialistic and archaic subgenre that "demonizes" everything outside of major cities as violent and simple even as it fails in its claim to create freedom for certain individuals (Klinger, 192). To accomplish this goal, I will analyze three road films from three distinct periods in history: *Easy Rider, Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, and *The Martian.*

On the surface, there could not be three more different road movies. *Easy Rider*, considered by many to be the first countercultural road movie, tracks the progress of two motorcyclists, Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper), on their way from Los Angeles to Florida by way of Mardi Gras. Along the way, they encounter delightful slices of Americana, ranging from a commune full of failed hippies to a small-town parade to a rural diner. Often hailed as a classic by critics and audiences alike, *Easy Rider*'s "88% Fresh" rating on Rotten Tomatoes denotes it as an important and popular film (RottenTomatoes.com, 2016). Jumping ahead several years and whole generations of characterizations, I will next transition to *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (2008), Jon Hurwitz's absurdist stoner comedy from 2008 tracking an East Asian man, Harold (John Cho) and a South Asian man, Kumar (Kal Penn) as they travel from Guantanamo Bay to disrupt

a wedding in central Texas. Though some would claim that *Escape* is nothing more than a pastiche of the road movie, I argue that it aims to critically break down and rewrite the troubled history of the genre in the wake of George W. Bush's second term in office. Finally, I will explore *The Martian* (2015), a science fiction film from Ridley Scott concerning NASA botanist Mark Watney's (Matt Damon) abandonment on Mars in the near future. The one striking difference between *The Martian* and its road movie peers is an utter lack of people; Watney's Red Planet road trip is uniquely isolating. While this shift could be interpreted as moving toward an entirely different genre, the same mechanisms of Frontierism with a taste of xenophobia are enacted over again in a fascinatingly postmodern way.

Katie Mills wrote in *The Road Story and the Rebel* that "the road movie's sympathies shift with each party in power", marking the subgenre as an amorphous indicator of what exactly is happening in the country at large (189). We can say that about the films I am analyzing as well: *Easy Rider*'s 1969 release coincided with the high-water mark of the 1960s just as *Escape* and Barack Obama's message of change overlapped just as *The Martian* comes as humanity squares up to face the future. The road movie is the clearest channel for new, progressive ideas in feature films, and yet the scrappy subgenre still clings to an inherently imperialistic structure: to be travelling is to be in the know, and to be off the road is to live brutishly.

I suppose this is where my own personal fascination with the road movie and travel narratives as a whole enters into the conversation. Nearly two years ago, I was sitting in my room considering what I could possibly write on for a final project in an English class. As my wandering eye perused the bookshelf, it stuck on one of

my favorite novels: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. I've always loved Hunter S. Thompson and his introspective madness; as an introvert, never having to worry about social skills because you just don't care about anyone else is a wild fantasy. But that day, another character seized me. "What about the hitchhiker they pick up?" I thought to myself. He was just a kid stuck on the road, hopelessly out of resources and trying to make it to wherever he could. Did he really deserve the vitriol spewing out of the red convertible? And what about the hotel clerks the pair continually abuse, or the clueless "normal" people they meet along the way? The thing that I love about countercultural road stories is that, by nature, they are untiringly obsessed with exploring the main characters in unparalleled depth. And yet, that pattern often leads to a narcissistic tale of two men versus the world. That day it dawned on me that the great secret of road movies is not the production of identity, but the alienation of the Other.

This realization is the crux of my argument: I am no longer comfortable with the way road movies deal with that which is off the road. Though the road movie evolves more quickly than nearly any other genre, certain imperialist concepts remain the same. Because these are not just passing trends but also constant themes in the road movie, the subgenre deserves reconsideration from an academic standpoint. But because the road movie means so much to me, this essay represents both an abstract fascination and a personal exorcism of my own colonial ghosts that I needed to write.

How the West Was Won: A History, In Theory

Every character on the road ostensibly has total free reign over their physical travel, or at least until they run out of gasoline. Mills calls it the "the raw exuberance of automobility" (Mills, 15), while Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark contend that Jean Baudrillard's association of "American culture with 'space, speed, cinema, technology'… could just as well be describing the characteristic features of a road movie" (Cohan & Hark, 1). Put more simply, the road movie exists outside of time and culture as the American Dream.

Though Katie Mills calls them "rebels", a more apt comparison to the filmic freedom travellers relish is the character of the Exile in diasporic cinema experiences. In his essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora,* Stuart Hall argues that "the inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms", thus creating "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless—a race of angels" (Hall, 395) who "can't literally go home again" (399). In other words, Exiles are rebels without a safety net. Though Hall's subject (1990s Afro-Caribbean third cinema) is vastly different from American road movies, I contend that *the promises the two make are the same:* both subgenres seek to create an enlightened, exilic traveller who transfixes the audience with the "perverse palimpsest" that comes with an explorer's lifestyle (Hall, 400). For example, when *Easy Rider*'s Wyatt "went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere" as per the film's tagline, his character is positioned as both as a privileged searcher and an unwilling exile who is unable to "go home again" (Hall, 399). And yet, while exilic road movies often focus on exploring what oppresses the travellers, the American road movie has

tunnel vision on how their characters are incompatible with the squares they meet along the way.

Before the 1960s, "the majority of road movies… more successfully imagined an ultimate reintegration of road travelers into the dominant culture" (Cohan & Hark, 5) We can see this in early road movies such as Preston Sturges' 1941 *Sullivan's Travels*, in which a disillusioned comedy director takes to the road to incorporate the world's suffering into his production *O Brother, Where Art Thou.* Upon his return to society, the director wishes nothing more than to make another shallow film, though now he views it as a way to alleviate the world's pain. While the road did change our hero's life, at the end of the day, it is undeniable that he also returned home to a boring suburban existence. But following the success of *Easy Rider*'s loose narrative and looser protagonists, the road movie became fraught with anarchic routes, with an emphasis on self-discovery that denies our heroes any idea of return. They become countercultural icons, unable to mesh with a society that does not know the same things they do.

And as can be expected of counterculture, the dominant culture frequently pushes back. Usually, this is through brutish violence or hateful words performed on the protagonists, either by police forces (*Thelma and Louise, Badlands,* and others) or by private citizens (*Easy Rider, Deliverance,* and others.) Portrayals of "rebels, outlaws, and by extension, the counterculture as a whole, as victims… extinguished by the straight world" grew to be the norm, transforming kids on the road into anti-heroic martyrs (Biskind, 74). For the first time since *Rebel Without a Cause*, it was hip to be young, misunderstood, and dead.

A road movie's heroes are most commonly hip straight white men from the city, a characterization pioneered[1] by the two hippie bikers bound for Florida in *Easy Rider.* The road movie has progressed since then, of course; underrepresented demographics (women, minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community) wishing to enter the genre began to "recycle certain tropes [of the road movie] in order to highlight the difference between a new type of protagonists and [their] predecessors" in the 1990s (Mills, 6). During this period, films like *Powwow Highway* (1989), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) began showing differently identified characters utilizing the same mechanisms to "debunk [the] patriarchal baggage" of more classic films like *Easy Rider* (Mills, 11). However, though the faces on the cars and bikes have changed, the cultural effects have not.

A close reading of road movies reveals a truth that is both terrible and unsurprising: people from outside the privileged bosom of the city perform every single act of violence. How can it be that driving barely outside the citadel's gates opens relatively harmless nomads up to random hate, and is it possible that the only actions certain citizens can perform are violent? I would argue that the inherent structure of the road movie has created an essentialized image of small towns and other spaces outside the city's walls as the primary source of xenophobic violence.

Elayne Rapping finds a similar trend in one-sided portrayals of the urban poor in the reality show *Cops*. Because the show's "villains" are shown only when they are being arrested or otherwise interrogated by the heroic peacekeepers, "they are incorrigibly 'other' and 'alien,' incapable of internalizing or abiding by the norms

[1] Admittedly, Kerouac's *On the Road* and Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, among other countercultural works of the period, influenced Hopper's and Fonda's characters.

and values [of society]" (Rapping, 217). Furthermore, Rapping suggests that such images do not present "a context that might explain their deplorable state of life or suggest ways to remedy it… these people [are presented] as alien, depraved, and inferior" (229). Road movies create a similar phenomenon by unilaterally portraying similar areas as what Edward Said would call "Other", though the trend is not unique.

In *Culture and Imperialism,* Edward Said asserts that America was founded on "a commitment… which, on the one hand, allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior or less advanced peoples" (Said, 10). If we remove the intercontinental distance in "distant", Said's assertion becomes eerily similar to Manifest Destiny. Almost every traveler in a road movie comes from the city, so travellers that accept the notion of "imperium" and apply subjugation to the "native peoples" in the areas they travel through become active participants in a form of domestic imperialism.

Traditionally, to study a landscape, one necessarily has to study the people who live there; landscapes are by definition a combination of the people within and the physical geography. As Rachel Delue says in her introduction to *Landscape Theory*:

> [The concept of landscape is] confused (vexed, difficult, hard to get one's head around) precisely because we, ourselves, cannot properly see it (whatever "it" is), and this in part because we do not know exactly what we are looking for (witness the struggle to define the

> term manifest throughout the present volume) because, as with Hawthorne and Fuller, we have seen way too much of it already (Delue, 9-10)

Delue shortly goes on to write that landscapes are "both our subject and the thing within which we exist" (10). To put it even more simply, landscapes are simultaneously the place we are and the place we observe. For the heroes of a road movie, this duality can be strange; an exilic identity does not lend itself to immersion in a place. As the countercultural protagonists of the film, travellers enter landscapes with a strongly characterized personal identity that is often at odds with the people and places around them.

And so we have the perfect storm: travellers are not only exiles seeking to find their identity in escaping, but also missionaries waiting to be gunned down by the ignorant hordes in the ruthless outlands. By various portrayals and stylistic choices, road movies create what I will call "Landscapes of Brutality." These places are positioned between the beginning of the journey and the desired final destination. They are demarcated as unimportant because they are neither here nor there, and are thus undesirable to live in. And in these Landscapes of Brutality, violence and ignorance are not only the norm, but also *the singularly accepted law of the land*.

"**This Used to Be a Helluva Good Country**"

When Wyatt abandons his wristwatch[2] near the beginning of *Easy Rider*, he is obviously symbolically leaving behind the norms of measured society as a whole. As the camera tracks into a static extreme wide shot of the California landscape, we see the bikers ride away into the smoggy sun setting over the mountains like cowboys at the end of the stereotypical Western. In fact many elements, from the character names[3] to the desert atmosphere, align the film with common images of the Western. An apt comparison, considering the climate of counterculture in the Western at the time:

> The articulation of these various elements—cultural consensus, government, youth, and gender—reveals in [Cold War Westerns] a growing discomfort with American cultural norms, ambiguity about moral action, and increasing doubt that moral action is possible within the American community. (O'Connor and Rollins, 177)

Because the abandoned watch is juxtaposed against a lengthy montage emphasizing Wyatt's American flag-covered bike and body, Dennis Hopper makes a bold claim that lasts the rest of the film: to be American is to be free from the rules of society, which is to ride into the Frontier. Returning to Hall and Said, we can see that Hopper's thought process is not entirely unique. "The *production* of identity [is] not grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past" writes Hall (Hall, 393), while Said contributes that "appeals to the past are the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present" (Said, 3). Hopper's methodologies for

[2] I'd like to make some light ties between the conclusion of Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and this beginning. In both scenes, the watch symbolizes domesticity, a young gunfighter coming into his fortune, and the choice between the two. It's a bit of a tangent, but Hopper's influence is clear: Wyatt's an old-fashioned cowboy.

[3] "Wyatt" is based on Tombstone's famous lawman Wyatt Earp, while "Billy" is short for "Billy the Kid", according to the 1999 documentary *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage* (Kiselyak, 1999).

reinforcing his claim are ingeniously simple, and can be broken down into the two primary ways our travellers experience their road trip. And while the first trend, musical travel montage, is focused around how travellers experience their actual travel, the second, physical encounters with the natives, is where the most brutal proofs emerge.

Play Me Some Steppenwolf

Easy Rider is an instant classic based solely on the merit of Lázlo Kovács' cinematography, especially his wide panoramas of natural spaces. In the opening credits, we see Wyatt and Billy riding east out of California and the hulking metropolis that is Los Angeles. As the bikers travel farther inland and away from the desert, their surroundings grow more lush and full of water, an unmistakable[4] sign of the natural flora and vitality missing in Los Angeles. The musical accompaniment, Steppenwolf's *Born to Be Wild*, is perhaps the most identifiable piece of music in the film, and underlines that our bikers are "like [two] true nature's child[s]", both "Wild" by nature and civilized by upbringing (Bonfire, 1968). *Easy Rider*'s soundtrack is one of the first compiled scores to appear in mainstream media, featuring the iconic countercultural sounds of The Seeds, The Electric Prunes, and Jefferson Airplane, among others. According to David Shumway, these music choices do not create the sense of nostalgia that is typical with comparable scores of the

[4] We are even given a shot of the "Colorado River" signpost to pound the point home. Rivers have traditionally been "the root of all life" in literature and storytelling according to scholar T.S. McMillin (McMillin, xii).

time (*The Graduate* (1967), for instance), but rather a "strong sense of generational identity" for the intended young audience (Shumway, 38).

This message is reinforced through a rare scene not involving the metal steeds, which features Wyatt, Billy, and two hippie women skinny-dipping in a nearby river. A bike ride is heavily implied, but the suture itself is simply a hard cut from the commune's patriarch performing slow motion Tai Chi outside the walls to the happy pair of couples loping along the riverside as The Byrds' *Wasn't Born to Follow* plays. The four travellers swim together in an isolated alcove, alternating between innocent splashing and casual foreplay indicative of the love generation's sexual openness. Shumway's assertion seems to be true, considering audiences found themselves drawn into tantric countercultural bliss.

And yet, anything that creates a sense of identification must, by nature, render the opposite side "Other." While the two destinations in the river scene are relatively close geographically, the commune is demarcated as a place to "make a stand" and grow crops while the water is a place to be free for those who were not "born to follow." Though their hippie hearts are in the right place, the commune dwellers have still decided to settle down and thus have abandoned the rambling frontier spirit Wyatt and Billy treasure. Wyatt's final line upon his return to the commune takes on an urgency atypical to his character: "I just gotta go" (Hopper, 1969).

While the hippies at the commune are relatively spared from judgment, other rural citizens who are less hip do not receive anything near the same benefit of the doubt. Shortly after small-town alcoholic and ACLU lawyer George Hansen (Jack

Nicholson) joins the trip to Mardi Gras, the caravan heads into a more populated area for a pit stop. This particular day's travels are accompanied by two polarizing counterculture songs: *Don't Bogart That Joint* by Fraternity of Man and *If 6 Was 9* by Jimi Hendrix. But while *Don't Bogart's* playful, lilting melody takes us through farmland primarily devoid of people, Hendrix's experimentally driving anthem cuts in with anxiety-provoking images of modernization, like crisscrossing steel bridges and power lines. While the song continues, the film begins to show passing Black families on the porches of their broken-down shanties from the bike's point of view. The lyrics split off here again to create a subtle tension between the hippies and the rural Black families, represented by Jimi Hendrix's lyrics: "If all the hippies cut off all their hair/ I don't care, I don't care/ Dig, 'cos I got my own world to live through" (Hendrix, 1967). Though the presence of a prominent Black musician criticizing the "hippies" gives a critical feeling to the scene, the overriding imperialistic and condescending gaze from the bikers combined with the audience's generational unity implied by the music gives the scene a strange energy. Jimi Hendrix becomes almost a token figure of Blackness that hippies were able to understand, while the visual figures of poor Louisiana families (who are clearly being filmed without their consent from an exploitative POV structure) are incompatible with any metropolitan frame of reference. Thus, Hendrix's music unifies the audience, but also divides "us" from "Other" without appearing to be overtly racist.

Cowboys and Indians

What happens when the travellers and the "natives" encounter each other face to face? According to the road movie, never anything good. Perhaps the most famous example of country bumpkin ignorance comes in the infamous diner scene. Hungry and fresh off the road, our travellers walk into a diner with the intention of minding their own business. Before the weary wanderers can even take their seat, someone loudly calls them out as "troublemakers" (Hopper, 1969). Over the next several minutes, the locals rain down not-so-passive insults that are alternatingly racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and otherwise offensive. A few choice lines: " I'd love to mate him up with one of those black wenches out there", "I think she's cute" in reference to Hopper, "I thought most jails were built for humanity, and that won't quite qualify", and a veiled Civil War reference to "Yankee queers" (Hopper, 1969). Surely one remark would have been enough to show they really should not stick around, but Hopper broods on the scene for nearly *four minutes* as the travellers are refused service and the ignorant villagers bombard them with hateful epithets. Even more troubling is the sheriff's deputy's presence as an instigator who claims that they "might have to bring [the bikers] up to the Hilton before it's all over with" (Hopper, 1969). George dismisses the lines as ignorant "country witticisms", but having an officer of the peace who is not only complicit in hatred but who actively acknowledges that they "won't make the [county] line" is a direct demonstration of a Landscape of Brutality. In this part of the country, even the police are against outsiders.

Exceptions to this hyper-masculine brand of encounter are troubling in their own right. Intercut with insults in the diner are shots of young women attracted to the bikers. To the bikers (and thus to the audience) the women exist in the film as nothing more than "poontang", are characterized solely by their attraction to the bikers, and seem to just be possessions for the men to protect. While it is easy to suggest the sequence occurs the way it does because *Easy Rider* came out in a misogynistic era, we need only to turn to the prostitutes later in the film for more positive female characters. While the end goal here is the same, the setting is entirely different because the prostitutes are originally from metropolitan New Orleans. Hired for sexual services, the two instead play a key part in intellectual expansion through hallucinogens during the film's most abstract sequence. The women are given key roles in moving the plot forward presumably not only for their rebellious qualities but also for their identity as countercultural drug users. The argument seems like a stretch until we consider that the only other fleshed-out women in the film are shown in the commune, which is full of self-proclaimed "city kids" who regularly smoke the same things our travellers do (Hopper, 1969). In contrast, the rural women are shown as dumb objects owned by the backwards hillbillies, only capable of desire for the refined city folk.

Easy Rider also contains an unusual reference to the concept of an agrarian society early in the film. A flat tire prompts the bikers to pull into a barn along the path, where they deal with the flat tire in abrasive apposition to a farmer shoeing his horse. The wholesome dinner they eat with the farmer's family confirms they have entered a simpler world of the past, down to Billy removing his ridiculous cowboy

hat for recitation of Grace. As the bikers discuss their Los Angeles origins, the farmer says that he was going[5] to make it to California once too, "but, well, you know how it is" (Hopper, 1969). Later in the conversation, Wyatt responds with perhaps the most condescending line of the film: "You've got a nice place. It's not every man that can live off the land, you know. You do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud" (Hopper, 1969). Admittedly, the words themselves are technically praiseful of the farmer, but the demeanor in which he says them is the same as a teacher giving a preschooler a gold star. Roger Ebert troubles this line in his 2004 revisit of the film: "The rancher, who might understandably have replied, 'Who the hell asked you?' nods gratefully" (Ebert, 2004). By having the modest farmer accept the underhanded praise with humble gratitude, Hopper shows the only alternative to Brutality is obedience to the clearly superior forces of civilization.

In their rare human moments, our riders cease their journey for their nightly campfires. As a respite from encounters, the campfire serves as a place for reflection and meaning making for both our characters and the film's audience. There are five of these scenes strewn across the course of the film, and each one introduces a new way for Hopper to impart his gospel of the new frontier.

Easy Rider's fourth campground is home to two of the most famously quoted lines in the film, as well as the scene that cemented Jack Nicholson as a force in American cinema. Set in the swamp of Louisiana, the first line of dialogue comes as George stares into the fire: "This used to be a helluva good country. I can't

[5] Starting multiple times fruitlessly seems typical of rural people in *Easy Rider*; even George never made it to Mardi Gras despite his numerous attempts. Every rural character seems unable to escape the landscape they live in despite a constant desire to, and Hopper's bias seems to be that no one can live out there without wanting to pick up their rucksack and hit the road.

understand what's gone wrong with it" (Hopper, 1969). Billy takes a drag off the joint and responds with what we have all been thinking: "Hey, we can't even get into like, uh, second-rate hotel, I mean, a second-rate motel. You dig? They think we're gonna cut their throat or something, man. They're scared" (Hopper, 1969). This small moment may not seem a lot, but it is the closest Billy gets to trying to understand the motives of the people whose lands he is travelling through on a humanistic level. When confronted with dirty, smelly strangers, a natural reaction is fear until later explanation. Yes, it is a closed-minded response, but a logical one nonetheless.

However, the filmmakers immediately dismiss the moment by proclaiming in big capital letters that the riders are, in fact, American Freedom embodied. The reason the small-minded folks fear them according to George is because they are truly free:

> Talkin' about [freedom] and bein' it - that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. 'Course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em. (Hopper, 1969).

The austere lesson taught here could not be clearer: if you discuss what freedom means to you with unenlightened folk, they will annihilate you out of xenophobic hate. In his sardonic review for the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby called this monologue a "Statement (upper case)," but also noted this relates to "the threat that people like the nonconforming Wyatt and Billy represent to the ordinary, self-righteous, inhibited folk that are the Real America. Wyatt and Billy, says the

lawyer, represent freedom; ergo, says the film, they must be destroyed" (Canby, 1969). Flawed though the logic may be, Hopper drives the point home by having a gang of rednecks from the local town beat the bikers while they sleep, resulting in George's death. There is no apparent reason for the murder; these people in the Brutal outlands are demons just as much as the Indians were to General Custer.

The final campfire is one of the most contested scenes in the film's entire runtime, and it all stems from one line: "We blew it" (Hopper, 1969). Uttered by Wyatt immediately after Billy's verbal victory lap, the line becomes a ubiquitous generational statement. Fonda and his overly serious gang of filmmakers meant it as the final moment in their odyssey, but also as a staunch[6] notation that by achieving money and paradise the hippies (and by extension, all of the Lovers) became doomed. Peace and love are simply not realistic sentiments in changing times, and so the Love Generation is over. It would seem that this final scene is a warning to all the heads in the audience: you are not welcome in the Landscapes of Brutality; your time and place is here and now, and it is sure ending soon.

Disrespecting History

Where exactly should I land on *Easy Rider*? On the one hand, the film is a fumbling masterpiece that defined the Vietnam War era, and should thus be respected as a cultural artifact. However, one could also say that *The Birth of a Nation* defined another generation. Perhaps scholar Barbara Klinger put it the best in her extensively researched essay on *Easy Rider* as a cultural phenomenon:

[6] In 2016, the line plays unfortunately like a bad joke. Ebert spares it only one word: "Heavy." (Ebert).

> [*Easy Rider*] generated substantial debate, [and] critics from the alternative and mainstream presses alike generally saw it as a spectacular document of its times that effectively represented the hippie ethos as well as the serious rifts between counter- and dominant cultures (Klinger, 179).

So, no, I cannot write *Easy Rider* off as an insensitive film in a vacuum, nor should I. Because of its popularity and acclaim, the film defined what an American road movie is: white city boys versus the unwashed hordes.

My entire argument becomes predicated on Klinger's analysis of the final scene. Seemingly out of nowhere, two rednecks pull up alongside the riders in a pick-up truck, intent on "[scaring] the hell out of them" with a brandished shotgun (Hopper, 1969). When Billy returns their greeting with his middle finger, the man with the gun pulls his trigger. After a sufficient reaction from Wyatt, we rejoin the rednecks in their cab. Seemingly unperturbed, the shooter says, "We'd better go back" so that we can believe for a second that they want to return and take moral responsibility for what was clearly an accident (Hopper, 1969). Instead, the men return to destroy, gunning down Wyatt and obliterating his patriotic bike.

Amidst praise of *Easy Rider* and the context of the genre as a whole, Klinger manages to slip in a beguiling string of sentences: "[In *Easy Rider*,] not only is the West idealized, but the South is demonized. *Easy Rider*'s South bears the burden for all of civilization's maladies, including small-town racial prejudice, xenophobia, and the negative effects of modernization, urbanization, and industrial growth" (Klinger, 192). Though Klinger immediately moves on, I believe she has reached the crux of *Easy Rider*'s exact sin for me: not only does the structure of the road movie situate alien, Othered Landscapes of Brutality as fundamentally against travellers from the

city, but it also names them in a specific time and place. Ambiguous brutes did not gun down Wyatt and Billy; poor rural Southerners who hated hippies murdered them in cold blood. And as perhaps *the* formative road movie in the canon, the way *Easy Rider* points a finger at small towns in the American South sets a disturbing precedent for what was to come.

And so, yes, *Easy Rider* is outdated and offensive to some. However, the bigger question to ask is, has society been able to make a road movie that is not an imperialist telling of travellers versus Landscapes of Brutality? I am not quite sure if it is possible to make a movie about exploring that is not inherently imperialistic, but *Harold And Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay* may be as close as we have gotten so far.

Swinging For The (Chain Link) Fences

After the aforementioned advent of progressive road movies in the 1990s, it is no surprise that a 2004 audience received the crude comedy *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* with much enthusiasm.[7] Critics who were not easily offended recognized that "behind all the Farrelly-esque gross-out humour and Cheech & Chong-isms lies a sensitive little picture with a deftly handled anti-racism slant", (Adams, 2004). The movie itself tracks Harold and Kumar as they travel to the fast food chain White Castle to take care of a serious case of the munchies. Because of the film's great critical and financial success, a sequel was in order: *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*.

Parody Matters

Why do I consider the silly stoner movie such a vital rebuttal to the canonical American road movie? Simply put, the *Harold and Kumar* series is a statement that people of color, specifically East Asian and South Asian men, can have their own identities and adventures on the road. Katie Mills would note that the journey Harold and Kumar undergo is actually repurposed from *Easy Rider*'s kin "in order to highlight the differences in identity between a new type of protagonists and [their] predecessors, or to exploit their similarities" (Mills, 6), while Edward Said's comments on "appeals to the past" become relevant once again (Said, 3). A deft message against institutional racism becomes clear even in the transitioning titles: "*Go*ing" turns into an "*Escape*". The trip to White Castle revels in its "exuberance of

[7] 74% Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes (RottenTomatoes.com).

automobility" (sprinkling in racist cops and a gang of redneck reprobates along the way), but the second film is more explicitly a desperate flight from absurdly evil agents of the oppressive Federal Government (Mills, 15).

And yet, media scholars would be skeptical to include a film featuring a graphic sexual fantasy between a couple and their human-sized bag of marijuana in the canon because it is seems like a pointlessly crude image. Dan Harries touches on this trend in his *Film Parody*, which claims that "many theorists of parody… seem reluctant to give any credence to the proposition that parody is itself a canonical process, thus reducing parody to a formless, random assault on established codes and conventions" (Harries, 7). The critical bias is no doubt based on the success of nonsensical films like *Austin Powers: International Man Of Mystery*, which I would deem is closer to a cash-grabbing pastiche, and less so on more serious social commentaries found in films like *Blazing Saddles* or *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The key difference between these two types of film is simple: "parody deconstructs, pastiche reconstructs" (Harries, 31). There is an intimate relationship between parody, then, and the core of the canon, as opposed to "pastiche, which was to be distinguished from parody by the absence of any critical distance from the ur-text" (Dentith, 155).

We can see certainly see innocent moments in *Escape* that are in direct conversation with more traditional road films. For instance, while escaping from Guantanamo Bay, Harold and Kumar run across a boat full of immigrants, presumably refugees going from Cuba to Miami. Like the commune dwellers in *Easy Rider*, the immigrants immediately offer them help by way of a ride to Miami, and so

we expect them to be similarly limited. And yes, one could argue that the city dwellers treat the Cubans unfairly via a condescending lecture on the wonders of TiVo, but on the other hand, Harold and Kumar are relinquishing control of their own automobility. In this way, the personal power of the road movie is reduced to bumming a boat ride from friendly immigrants, bringing into question the unfailing invincibility and autonomy of traditional travellers.

In contrast to these lighter moments, there are also times that address horrors such as the unspeakable acts happening in Guantanamo Bay, or at a modern assemblage of the KKK. These moments of contemporary inequity and performance of institutional violence specifically on people of color may be exactly what America needed to draw attention to what a road movie can be as an institution for change. For indeed, parody's "reworkings affect not only the viewing of previous textual systems but also the construction and viewing of future related canonical films" (Harries, 7). Once you see *Escape*, you'll never see *Easy Rider* or the society it flourished in the same.

This was a particularly powerful message for the progressive audience in 2008. Far over five years into a seemingly unwinnable "war on terror" with an unpopular presidential administration, American citizens were ready to see themselves anywhere but here. The time to evolve had come again, and yet upon closer examination of Harold and Kumar's journey, we can point out a few key points where it is no better than *Easy Rider* to the people met on the road. bell hooks characterized this phenomenon differently than Katie Mills might have:

> Concurrently, marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by [an] emphasis on

> Otherness [and appropriating culture], by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation. (hooks, 370).

Through this lens, Harold and Kumar can be seen as different faced tokens on the same imperialist coin.

The Individual Face Of Counterterrorism

The central thesis to *Escape* is, simply, the War on Terror was a xenophobic overreaction. When Kumar pulls out a bong in an airplane bathroom on the flight to Amsterdam, an elderly woman with a significant racial prejudice[8] alerts air marshals who detain both travellers. In the subsequent interrogation session, Ron Fox announces that Harold and Kumar are going to a place where "they have never even heard of rights": Guantanamo Bay (Hurwitz, 2008). Upon arrival, Harold and Kumar are confronted with their new captor, Big Bob, who forces the pair to fellate[9] him. Though the assault is never completed, we must pause for a moment and consider the situation. What does it mean to criticize one individual in place of a large institution? On the one hand, this is an effective tool of parody because, objectively, it is times easier and more effective to show a character that represents a concept than it is to show the concept itself. So, on the one hand, Big Bob becomes an embodiment of his uniform, and a representation of the United States Government that is storing people of color on the forgotten half of a forbidden

[8] Manifested through a hallucination of Kumar with a full-length beard and turban.
[9] Inarguably, *Harold and Kumar* is homophobic; making a common sex act into a humorous analogue for both prison rape and torture is one of the most tasteless moments I've seen in recent memory. I have the feeling that waterboarding scenes would not have gotten many laughs, but still.

island. By naming and portraying the space of the Guantanamo Bay prison explicitly, the filmmakers made what was a bizarre concept into an actualized object.

But to return to our colonial lens, Big Bob is also the one guard with a significant speaking role. Why then must he look like he walked off the set of *Duck Dynasty* and use the crudity, "ain't nothing gay about getting your dick sucked" before calling the pair "fags"? Though he is an enforcer for the institution, Big Bob is moreover defined by his rural outlander identity. At this point, the filmmakers and the audience both knew there were federally sanctioned atrocities[10] occurring within Cuban walls, and Amnesty International had already called it "the Gulag of our times" (Kahn, 2005). The film clearly intends to criticize the Bush administration as a whole, but inadvertently creates a Landscape of Brutality untied from civilization and filled with uneducated and hateful "Big Bob" types, making the scene "rhyme" more and more with that diner Wyatt, Billy and George escaped. Yes, it is the government's fault for creating this Landscape of Brutality, but they are not the ones performing the brutal acts, and they are not the ones from whom Harold and Kumar must escape from right now. Though the focus of the parody would be most effective if it focused on the system that imprisoned them, it unintentionally swings toward the uneducated citizen, another Othered figure.

A second example of a scapegoat citizen is the President of the United States. Admittedly, George W. Bush did have a 22% approval rating when he left office in 2009, and portrayals of the man as an outright idiot were pervasive (CBSNews, 2008). So, when Harold and Kumar finally run across the then-president at the end

[10] Though, admittedly, they may not have known about the infamous "Torture Memo", whose controversy only came to the mainstream in 2009.

of the film, most audiences accepted that he was a beer-swilling simpleton without a second thought. But when the trio retreats to Bush's "man cave" to flee Dick Cheney and smoke marijuana, there is an entirely new transformation that takes place. The small room is decked out like a frat house, up to and including a dartboard with Osama Bin Laden's face in place of the bull's-eye. These surroundings, complimented by Bush's use of phrases like "terrorizer" in place of "terrorist" and "Mitsubishi-wa" in place of "konnichiwa", become endearing because he is able to relax to the soft sounds of Jimi Hendrix[11] and light up[12] with the travellers; Bush does not mean what he says because he is just an overage kid along for the joke. Though he is the President of the United States, George Bush is a subservient simpleton in the same way that *Easy Rider*'s humble farmer is, or even a strange shade of George from the same film. And arguably, the reason he is this way is due to his other defining element: a thick, Texan drawl. Stuck securely in small town Texas, Bush becomes the only symbol of the state and the region we are ever given. To portray him as an incompetent immature drug addict lashing out at whatever comes his way is not indicative of the policies of a political admistration so much as it is an indictment of the rural Texans Bush represents. The film slips out of parodic deconstruction and into a pastiche of the uneducated Other.

[11] Music plays a key role in this as well. The filmmakers juxtapose cuts from the wedding's classical music to the man cave's soundtrack: Jimi Hendrix's *Hey Joe*.
[12] As if this has not been clear, marijuana is the great equalizer in the countercultural road movie. *Easy Rider*'s George is only truly accepted after his introduction to the herb, and Bush is already shown to possess a certain stoner mindset. Other examples include the farmer earlier in *Escape*.

Taking Stock

Though road movies progressed incredibly from 1969 to 2008, from Wyatt and Billy to 'Roldy and Kumar, we must still realize that 2008 is simply less far in the rear view mirror at this point in time. As a product of the 21st century, *Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay* is many, many times more aware of its own imperialism. In fact, picking it apart almost seems like nitpicking at times. And I will admit, much of this reluctance to deconstruct the film comes from my own personal bias; I came into my own political consciousness at the end of the Bush era, and Harold and Kumar's sprint away from the neoliberal state mirrors my own anxieties. Yet, I am not alone; the target audience for these films is clearly liberal millennials, and it rode the wave of Change instituted by Mr. Obama's own Presidential campaign.

In fact, there are a few direct ties to make between the Obama administration and *Escape*. First and foremost, the release date of *Escape* (April 25th, 2008) came almost exactly four months before Mr. Obama clinched the Democratic Nomination, allowing the movie to serve as a political groundswell for the candidate. Furthermore, Kalpen Modi (also known as Kal Penn, who played Kumar) was the Associate Director of Public Engagement for President Obama's administration from early 2009 to 2012. Inside and outside of its filmic elements, *Escape* successfully encompassed and anticipated the changing political climate of the U.S. in 2008, and yet by its association with Landscapes of Brutality still failed to shake off certain imperial structures.

In 2016, we are again in a moment of change; as of this writing, Donald Trump appears to be locked into the GOP nomination, Bernie Sanders is leading a Cinderella race to pull Hilary Clinton farther left, and the protests in the streets just keep coming. In moments of extreme polarity on Earth, perhaps the best reaction is to turn to the stars.

After Earth

The Martian is hardly your typical road movie. As the near future story of NASA astronaut and botanist Mark Watney after an unfortunate series of events strand him alone on Mars, *The Martian* watches like an obscure hybrid of *Alien* and *Cast Away*. Soon after he is stranded, Watney comes to the realization that he does not want to die alone in space. All of his survival essentials have been taken care of by NASA except for the simple biological need for calories, so Watney begins growing potatoes and exploring the world around him. Eventually, Watney is able to come home and all is well again. In this way, *The Martian* is just like any road movie: the hero leaves home, the hero learns things, and the hero arrives. And yet, there is this strange middle portion of the film, where Watney is stranded off the road.

Stereotypes… In Space!

There is a long precedent associating space travel and logics of the Frontier, especially after the advent of the television show *Star Trek*. Originally pitched as "*Wagon Train* to the stars", *Trek* could be called an analogue for settling the Frontier, complete with "explorers, pioneers, cowboys, and settlers" (Sturgis, 125-126). Bridging to the literal, the third season's "The Paradise Syndrome" episode addresses the Enterprise's relationship with native people on the exotic planet of Amerind. Captain James T. Kirk arrives on the planet, is mistaken for a god by the buckskin-clad natives, marries into the tribe as their leader, and has his constituency turn on him, all in the span of a single episode. The show's creator explains the simplistic stereotype away with an austere and familiar philosophy:

"contemporary man discovers the exotic and primitive life, but he tragically learns that he cannot be content there because he is too much a creature of progress and modernity" (Sturgis, 127). This simple incompatibility between the Civilized and the Other both permeated the fabric of *Star Trek* and the subgenre of space travel quickly followed after.

However if the uncivilized people are subtracted, as they are in *The Martian*, then surely there is no one to be represented poorly. Is Watney's home on Mars just an innocent settlement from an imperialist perspective? Technically, yes. But the sentiment itself has not changed from Said's original thoughts, even if he claims, "empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist" (Said, 7). "None of us is outside or beyond geography," continues Said, "none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography" (Said, 7). The key word here is *geography*. If we take "geo" to mean, "Earth," Said is right, and his theory inapplicable to the post-human landscape. But if we take "the struggle over geography" to mean "the struggle over land", Mars becomes a ripe fruit.

If we trace Said's logic, people contesting land is inevitable in a capitalist system. In the case of Mars, the colonized people are not non-existent, but simply *not there yet*. While Watney's sole task is survival, the mission began in order to analyze whether Earthlings could colonize Mars. Watney is not just surviving, he is laying the infrastructure for future colonies to arrive and transmitting the information he learns back to his home planet. Whereas the Landscapes of Brutality in *Easy Rider* and *Escape* are byproducts of imperialism, *The Martian* addresses the same issues of postcolonial society in a precolonial alien landscape.

If These Hills Could Talk, They'd Call You An Asshole

Let us now revisit what a Landscape of Brutality is in a landscape with no people. Take a second to note, this does not mean a place where people have been removed, for erasure is a problematic issue unto its own right. No, the correct method in this case would be to take an entirely virginal chunk of land, uninhabited and unused by humans of any kind, and put a person in it. The addition of a person or persons is necessary because, as Delue noted, the landscape is "both our subject and the thing in which we exist" (Delue, 10).

This duality has a unique place in our everyday lives, but becomes even more complex in science fiction cinema. From the spectator's perspective, landscapes exist only to be observed because we cannot literally inhabit the world around the character any more than we can speak with them and expect a response. According to Vivian Sobchack, writing in *Screening Space*, the unknown in traditional science fiction films has been viewed as "beautiful and undiscovered country…which holds only minor terrors and creates minimal anxiety because it is…ultimately discoverable and conquerable" (Sobchack, 110). No matter what trouble astronauts face, the spectatorship we participate in paired with the apparent ease of interstellar travel leads to a simplification of NASA's domain. Sobchack notes later, "man has always slipped into his rocket as though it were a new automobile… [robbing] the infinite of its ability to really terrify us, and [reducing] its blank impenetrability to the dimensions of the highway" (Sobchack, 111).

There is something sinister to this type of landscape observation. Rose writes, "the discipline [of cinema]'s visuality is not simple observation but, rather, is

a sophisticated ideological device that enacts systematic erasures" (Rose, 87). This seems to fit with the strange phenomenon of cinematic immersion that takes place in road movies, for the director chooses what to show and what not to. In the cases of Landscapes of Brutality we have been working with, directors have traditionally shown the beauty of the landscape as separate from the Brutality of the Landscape.

Take for instance the final scene of another Ridley Scott film, *Thelma And Louise* (1991). Marita Sturken notes that one of the few conventions this film follows[13] is how the protagonists "are most happy and free when they are moving", and are frequently stymied when they stop (Sturken, 41). Though Sturken is concerned with feminism and automobility, the shots that make up "free and moving" sections are similar to montages featuring alien landscapes for the urban and suburban protagonists Lazlo Kovacs made famous in *Easy Rider*. The film's final scene is no different. Surrounded by cops, Thelma and Louise stop and consider their next move. In one of the most famous scenes in the film, they decide to "keep going," and drive into the canyon. "They have left their men and the world of men behind", writes Sturken, but I think there is something more there (Sturken, 77). The duo are also leaving the world of anxiety and dystopic landscapes ruled by humans in general, and entering a utopic space where they can exist without external interference, here represented by the walls of the Grand Canyon. Finding peace despite their dire physical situation proves the power of a human-free landscape to defeat a man-made Landscape of Brutality.

Evil people, not the geography itself, often define Landscapes of Brutality. But

[13] And indeed, this film was revolutionary in incredible ways, just not the ways I wanted to write on. I truly recommend watching it and, if you have the time, reading Sturken's book.

when there are no people to be evil and the landscape is a docile and easily conquered area, the foreign planet becomes a colonial fantasyland. The perfect dream of an empty planet, ready to be stripped of resources free of resistance by the colonized, should finally be realized on Mark Watney's Mars. And yet, it is not.

Panic at the Martian Disco

Though Watney is an explorer in his body, he has two important immaterial items connecting him back to Earth: a collection of media and the ability to send emails. Listening to music and sending emails seem like perfectly rational ways to kill time in 2016, but there is something a little strange about the way Watney interacts with the different types of media.

"It's a running joke that the only music [Watney] has on hand [in *The Martian* is] first-generation disco", writes Richard Brody for the New Yorker (R. Brody, 2015). The music makes for a curious study. On the one hand, it could be just an empty joke: Watney hates music and TV from the 1970s. But if we return to Shumway, we can dig another layer deeper into the idea of nostalgia. Shumway calls this feeling the "commodification of nostalgia," which "evokes the affect of nostalgia even among those who do not have actual memory of the period being revived" (Shumway, 40). He elaborates:

> The songs need not literally bring the past to life for the viewer but give the impression of such an experience, creating a fictional set of memories that, especially when taken together with other such representations, may actually come to replace the audience's 'original' sense of the past. Of course, those who lack any other representation of the period will be all the more likely to assume that the representation in the film is 'true.' (Shumway, 40)

When Watney jams out to *Rock The Boat* by the Hues Corporation, the audience is not thinking of 1974 but of how they know and relate to the extremely popular song. Again, "appeals to the past are the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present" (Said, 3). But there's an additional cultural association with the late 1960s and early 1970s when it comes to space. To put it simply, that era was when America began to rule the cosmos. After the early successes of Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet Union failed to reach the moon on four separate attempts between 1969 and 1972, while Apollo 11 landed there in 1969. Americans were ready to begin exploring the cosmos, and disco reflected the future out there. Like *Easy Rider*'s score created a generational identity, *The Martian*'s creates a fierce nationalism[14] associated with Earth.

One particular sequence that reflects the sentiment of American space exploration the best also features the iconic sounds of David Bowie's *Starman*. Watney has just received news that he will be able to rendezvous with his old crew on a Mars fly-by, but he must prepare rations and life support for a trip to the rocket on the other side of Mars. Simultaneously, his old crewmembers receive a probe from Earth with the necessary supplies to continue their mission and save Watney. This montage is one of the most road movie-esque in the film because it involves preparations for travel like packing up the rover, and the music fits. *Starman* is not quite "disco" in the same way *Turn The Beat Around* is, but it is from the correct period and about an interstellar being "waiting in the sky" (Bowie, 1972). Scott plays up the association between an internationally known artist, a catchy tune, and

[14] For more on this, I'd recommend the chapter "At The Twilight's Last Scoring" in Anahid Kassabian's *Hearing Film* (Kassabian, 93).

the relatable lyrics to perfection, giving off the feeling that all is well now that rescue is coming to the hostile planet by way of the civilized people at NASA.

The second way Watney entertains himself is through communication with Earth, specifically to NASA. After retrieving the *Pathfinder* probe (which was launched from Earth in 1997 to conduct basic tests on Mars), Watney is able to restart the probe and resume contact with Earth. This communication progresses sharply, moving within a few minutes of the film's runtime from Yes/No questions to a hexadecimal alphabet and finally into full blown text conversations once he "hacks" his rover to communicate with *Pathfinder*. Watney is only able to communicate mission critical information through the first two means, but an email relationship opens up brand new doors. Though the astronaut and the NASA officials he converses with are hundreds of millions of miles apart and their transmissions twenty-four minutes apart, the miracle of cinema means that we witness the events occurring simultaneously. When Watney is in conversation with NASA, he is in close filmic proximity to Earth, and thus no longer confined to the Red Planet. While the physical reality is phantom support, Watney is able to escape through communication with the mainland. Again, the Landscape of Brutality is defeated by the learned science of a civilized astronaut.

There is a third sort of communication, but it is neither direct nor even particularly effective. Throughout his time on Mars, Watney continually addresses cameras, presumably left behind as mission logs. Because Watney's mission effectively ended once he was abandoned, there is absolutely zero reason the astronaut should be recording himself on this regular of a basis. Traditionally,

authors and media makers have used this sort of journaling as a way to "[mark] a stage in [a castaway's] developing self-control", and the journal entries quickly begin to fall off when the need for an "accurate, true-to-its-origins account" disappears (McCrea, 157). While we can chalk it up just a clever way for Matt Damon to talk to the camera, there is also an undeniable association with the already established medium of a video log, or "vlog." By nature of their low[15] quality, the videos appear to be what Limor Shifman would call a "memetic video", or a video designed to look "distinct and perhaps defiant of glossy corporate content" (Shifman, 198). This quality gives the medium a sort of accessibility, the notion that the vlogger is conveying some more pure, truthful message that is not as engineered. For Watney, the authenticity also serves to put us in his safe Martian space. Though not on Earth in body, by mimicking the personal habits of a vlogger Watney creates an Earth-like space and thus erases the Landscape of Brutality right outside his airlock.

"Fuck You, Mars"

Ridley Scott once spoke on how exciting the concept of shooting a movie "on Mars" is for purely aesthetic reasons. Because almost all of the photography we have of Mars has focused on mission-critical information, the landscape photos transmitted back to earth have been "boring." "You're not going to land a piece of equipment in a rough mountain region [of Mars]" says Scott. "…You've got to start, at least, on pretty boring ground" (D. Brody, 2015). And this is how Watney's home

[15] Unless I miss my mark, these scenes were shot with mounted GoPro cameras.

appears at first: flat, plain desert. Dariusz Wolski's team soon compensates for this with digital manipulation and wide-angle shots of the red rolling hills of Mars. Watney takes a moment to reflect on the beautiful horizons one day: "Everywhere I go, I'm the first. It's a strange feeling. Step outside the rover, first guy to be there. Climb that hill, first guy to do that. Four and a half billion years, nobody here. And now, me. I'm the first person to be alone on an entire planet" (Goddard, 2015). The isolation is bizarre; even the most intense science fiction stories focus on exploration without mentioning the sheer loneliness[16] being stranded on a completely separate planet entails. Watney is a modern Crusoe, cast away on his island of Mars.

And this planet that surrounds him is, suffice to say, brutal to Watney. While *The Martian* features sudden events like an airlock breach and explosive decompressions, the more constant concerns of food, water and air truly drive the story's tension. This peaks early on in the film, when Watney realizes he will soon starve. "I've got to figure out a way to grow three years worth of food. On a planet where nothing grows…" intones Watney into the camera. Leaning forward, he seems to directly challenge the landscape itself: "Mars will come to fear my botany powers" (Goddard, 2015). This sentiment is repeated often, with Watney going so far as to outright say, "fuck you, Mars," as if he is literally fighting the planet itself. As previously mentioned, Watney comes up with the idea of growing potatoes using a combination of created water, the Martian soil, and his own feces. The action leads to one of the most interesting lines of the film, drawn straight from a letter he has

[16] Aside from obvious examples, like *Robinson Crusoe On Mars* (1964) or *Marooned* (1969).

received: “they say once you have grown crops somewhere, you have officially colonized it.” The line is meant to be another moment of levity but for Watney it is a declaration of survival. He cannot survive on Mars without colonizing it,[17] and so he must shape the landscape and grow his space potatoes.

In reality Watney is not alone; he is actually Matt Damon[18] surrounded by a film crew in the Jordanian desert, specifically in Wadi Rum. Scott attached a great significance to the appearance of the red canyon walls,[19] and noted that his “film world looks pretty accurate — at least I'm hoping Mars looks a little like that” (D. Brody, 2015). Sobchack writes on the “visual tension” created by shots set on a foreign planet and shot on Earth:

> These films… strive not to bring us down to Earth, but to remove us from it in various ways, at the same time we remain visually grounded. The visual movement of such films is not toward a neutralization of the alien and abstract, but rather toward the viewer’s alienation from the familiar and concrete. (Sobchack, 108)

The concept of an “alienated” Earth landscape is fascinating, especially considering the long history America has with Jordan and the Middle East at large. Instead of actualizing a space (as *Harold and Kumar* does with Cuba), this portrayal makes an exotic space even more so. The Middle East is confirmed as a space where humans cannot ever exist peacefully and safely, and the high desert walls of Wadi Rum proclaim an entire type of landscape on the Final Frontier uninhabitable without the intervention of white male explorers like Watney.

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[17] More astute viewers will realize that Watney is also mirroring real events here. In our world, Mars One hopes to send an unmanned mission by 2020 to prepare supplies for a private colony.
[18] Worth nothing that Damon also starred in both *Elysium* and *Interstellar* shortly before appearing in *The Martian.* He is a well-known space explorer to the theater-going crowd.
[19] Again, Wolski’s team transformed gray desert into crimson mountain ranges. The effect of new computer effects on how a landscape is shaped should not be underestimated, but is also too tangential to discuss here.

Here And Now

And so, we return to the question defining this paper: what is the significance of releasing a near-future space movie obsessed with the 1970s in the year 2015? Clearly, audiences responded well to the film, netting it roughly $228 million in domestic box office receipts and six Oscar nominations (BoxOfficeMojo.com, 2016). Perhaps this is because *The Martian* is the perfect concoction of simplistic, yet smart, science fiction. The entire film is surrounded by a mythos of highly technical jargon, and Watney is the equivalent of a space MacGyver as he deftly solves every problem on the planet. And yet, despite how often Watney insists everything he is doing is hopeless, doomed, or otherwise incredibly complex, it almost invariably works perfectly. Though the landscape of Mars is brutal and lonely, through colonial mediation it is survivable. Ridley Scott means to send a message of hope with his interstellar road movie, a message that we can escape our Earth because we are American humans. Perhaps the final monologue sums it up the best: "You can either accept [space travel as impossible], or you can get to work. That's all it is. You just… begin" (Goddard, 2015). The human race is ready to begin a new era of colonialism to the new horizons of space; all it is going to take is hope and hard work. And apparently, the road movie is getting dragged along with us.

That Which Is Left

The easiest part of this essay was proving its simple thesis: the road movie indeed possesses an imperial lens by nature. At this point, it is pretty hard to argue against the fact that Landscapes of Brutality exist, or even that they specifically target the lands and people who live off the road. That is not to say that the road movie has not moved forward, just not forward enough for me. Yes, enlightened society frowns upon simply placing two men on motorcycles and unleashing them into a fabricated Frontier, but *Easy Rider* is still a classic. Yes, a sharp-toothed parody featuring minority comedians in the final days of the Bush era holds up better, but *Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay* still places violence in the hands of dumb hicks instead of the larger institutions. And finally, *The Martian*'s tale of a witty marooned astronaut seemed to strike a modern audience perfectly right not because of the way it portrayed the Landscapes of Brutality as on a different planet, but by one lone astronaut's ability to tame the wild yonder and our collective desire to "bring him home." Perhaps this is because the road movie is a genre out of time, no matter which way you slice it. When it is not reaching backwards toward a better time period, it is reaching for a perfect future of understanding and peace. Unfortunately, the road movie cannot grab this promised future until it releases the structure it holds so dear.

Again, this entire paper comes down to a selfish journey: I want to point out what seems to fly under the radar in analyses of road movies, but more importantly I want to be able to enjoy them again. To "fix" the road movie for me personally, I must rid it of as many colonial ghosts as I can without destroying the themes of

exilic discovery I am so enraptured by. We've seen that society's progression has done much of the work for me, but the central structure remains.

Let me now challenge the three defining norms we began with. First, the road movie could still follow roughly two to four people travelling across the land, but it should not delve into the beauty Lázlo Kovács brings to *Easy Rider*; colonialism is not inherent in the travel itself until people are encountered, but isolating landscapes is just as harmful long term for the people who do or will live there. And second, this movie could still be about people changing over the course of a journey, for that lens is internal; it is only the external lands we see exploited, and removing the hillbilly killers, the Guantanamo Bay jailers, and the brutal Martian mountains all in one fell swoop would get the job done. To rid the road movie of its imperialistic flaws, then, we must make it more internal than external, and take the road movie off of the road.

I come out of this essay still lacking an answer to that most important question: where do we go from here? There is no one answer to how exactly the void should be filled, or even what type of media object[20] should fill it. The one thing I know is that, no matter what, the road movie cannot cease to exist. Films like *Easy Rider*, *Thelma And Louise*, and even *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* taught me personally the importance of experiencing other places, of getting out of my comfort zone. Without the influence of travel narratives, I would have never had the confidence to explore anything outside of my dorm room, and for this I owe the subgenre everything. Yet, without a conscious eye toward imperialism, I would

[20] I will be surprised if cinema lives another 100 years. Pleasantly surprised, but that prospect is still unlikely. The virtual reality road story is a fascinating rabbit hole for another day.

probably still deeply believe that the Pocahontas myth that any portrayals of natives are accurate, and the travellers are always righteously heroic martyrs.

The only solution I can think of is to shift the responsibility from the filmmakers to the spectator. The key to fixing the road movie, then, is knowing that the structure is not perfect and accepting that at face value, and taking the good along with the bad. While empty dreamers may wander desert highways in search of some unknowable Truth, we must work with what we have now. Hollywood will never change, but maybe I can.

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